



Holocaust Survivor Memoir Exposed as Fraud

by Mark Weber

A Holocaust survivor memoir that has received prestigious literary awards and lavish praise has been exposed as a hoax.

In *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, Benjamin Wilkomirski describes his ordeal as an infant in the Jewish ghetto of Riga (Latvia), where his earliest memory is of seeing his father being killed. Wilkomirski also tells how he survived the terrible rigors of wartime internment, at the age of three or four, in the German-run concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz.

First published in German in 1995, *Fragments* has been translated into twelve languages. In Switzerland, the country where Wilkomirski lives, the book has been a major best-seller. Two documentary films and numerous personal appearances by the author in schools throughout the country have helped promote the memoir.

The American edition was published by Schocken, an imprint of Random House, which heavily promoted the book with teachers' study guides and other supplementary materials.

Jewish groups and major American newspapers have warmly praised *Fragments*. The New York Times called it "stunning," and the Los Angeles Times lauded it as a "classic first-hand account of the Holocaust." It received the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography and Memoir, while in Britain it was awarded the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize, and in France the Prix Memoire de la Shoah.

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC -- a federal government agency -- was so impressed that it sent Wilkomirski on a six-city United States fund-raising tour last fall.

This past summer, though, compelling evidence came to light exposing Wilkomirski's memoir as an literary hoax.

Although he claims to have been born in Latvia in 1939, and to have arrived in Switzerland in 1947 or 1948, Swiss legal records show that he was actually born in Switzerland in February 1941, the son of an unwed woman, Yvette Grosjean. The infant was then adopted and raised by the Doessekkers, a middle-class Zurich couple. Jewish author Daniel Ganzfried, writing in the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche*, also reports that he has found a 1946 photo of the young Bruno Doessekker (Wilkomirski) in the garden of his adoptive parents.

Comparisons have been drawn between Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and *The Painted Bird*, the supposedly autobiographical "Holocaust memoir" by prominent literary figure Jerzy Kosinski that turned out to be fraudulent.

Reaction by Jewish Holocaust scholars to the new revelations has been instructive, because they seem more concerned about propagandistic impact than about historical truth. Their primary regret seems merely to be that the fraud has been detected, not that it was perpetrated.

In an essay published in a major Canadian newspaper (Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 18, 1998), Jewish writer Judith Shulevitz arrogantly argued that it doesn't really matter much if *Fragments* is authentic. Her main misgiving, apparently, is that the deceit was not more adroit: "I can't help wishing Wilkomirski-Doesseker [sic] had been more subtle in his efforts at deception, and produced the magnificent fraud world literature deserves."

Deborah Dwork, director of the Center for Holocaust Studies at Clark University (Worcester, Mass.), and co-author of *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (Yale Univ. Press, 1996), agrees that *Fragments* now appears to be fraudulent. At the same time, though, she expressed sympathy for Wilkomirski, saying that when she met him he appeared "to be a deeply scarred man." Amazingly, Dwork does not blame him for the imposture, "because she believes in his identity." Instead, she takes the publishers to task for having "exploited" Wilkomirski. (New York Times, Nov. 3, 1998).

Deborah Lipstadt, author of the anti-revisionist polemic *Denying the Holocaust*, has assigned *Fragments* in her Emory University class on Holocaust memoirs. When confronted with evidence that it is a fraud, she commented that the new revelations "might complicate matters somewhat, but [the work] is still powerful."

Daniel Ganzfried reports that Jews have complained to him that even if *Fragments* is a fraud, his exposé is dangerously aiding "those who deny the Holocaust."

American Jewish writer Howard Weiss makes a similar point in an essay published in the Chicago Jewish Star (Oct. 9-29, 1998):

Presenting a fictional account of the Holocaust as factual only provides ammunition to those who already deny that the horrors of Nazism and the death camps ever even happened. If one account is untrue, the deniers' reasoning goes, how can we be sure any survivors accounts are true ... Perhaps no one was ready to question the authenticity of the [Wilkomirski] account because just about anything concerning the Holocaust becomes sacrosanct.

Wilkomirski himself has responded to the new revelations by going into hiding, although he did issue a defiant statement describing the climate of discussion about his memoir as a "poisonous" atmosphere of "totalitarian judgment and criticism."

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